DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 062 696 EA 004 216

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TITLE Do You Need a Student School Board?
PUB DATE Mar 72
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at National Association of Secondary School Principals Annual Convention (56th, Anaheim, California, March 17-22, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Advisory Committees; *Boards of Education; Speeches; Student Attitudes; *Student Organizations; *Student Participation; Student Rights; *Student School Relationship

ABSTRACT

This speech discusses ways in which students may meaningfully participate in school governance. Some ways to involve students in decisionmaking include (1) the establishment of student advisory councils to central administrators, boards of education, and principals; (2) the initiation of student participation in school curriculum committees and ad hoc and permanent committees; and (3) the establishment of student school boards that meet regularly with school boards. The report stresses the importance of regular and frequent contact between school boards and member-students. (JF)

National Association of Secondary School Principals
March 17-22, 1972
Anaheim, California

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DO YOU NEED A STUDENT SCHOOL BOARD

by
Russell J. Fuog

ONE CANNOT READ TODAY'S NEWSPAPERS WITHOUT REALIZING THAT THE NATION'S SCHOOLS ARE MAKING SUBSTANTIAL CHANGES TO MEET NEW DEMANDS FOR STUDENTS RIGHTS. AND ONE OF THE STRONGEST DEMANDS THAT IS DEVELOPING IS FOR STUDENT PARTICIPATION ON SCHOOL BOARDS OR ADVISORY COUNCILS.

THE NUMBER OF YOUNG PEOPLE UNDER AGE 21 ON BOARDS OF EDUCATION HAS GROWN TO AT LEAST 15. THE MOST RECENT ADDITION TO THIS NEW CATEGORY ARE FOUR NEW JERSEY YOUTHS, 18 AND 19 YEARS OLD, WHO HAVE JUST BEEN ELECTED TO FULL-FLEDGED BOARD POSTS. THE FOUR NEW BOARD MEMBERS JOIN 10 OTHER YOUTHS IN FIVE STATES--OHIO, RHODE ISLAND, OREGON, NEW JERSEY, AND WASHINGTON -- WHO BEGAN SERVING LAST FALL.

ALL OF US KNOW THAT SCHOOLS ARE MAKING SUBSTANTIAL CHANGES TO MEET NEW DEMANDS FOR STUDENT RIGHTS. THIS ALSO IS THE CONCLUSION OF A NEW EDUCATION U.S.A. SPECIAL REPORT. THE TURNING POINT, SAYS THE REPORT, CAME WHEN THE SUPREME COURT, IN THE HISTORIC TINKER CASE, DECIDED THAT THE DOCTRINE OF IN LOCO PARENTIS MUST YIELD TO THE CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL, WHATEVER HIS AGE. SINCE THEN, COURT PRESSURE, OR FEAR OF IT, HAS CAUSED MORE AND MORE SCHOOLS TO DO AWAY WITH DETAILED REGULATIONS ON STUDENT CONDUCT, THE REPORT SAYS. AT THE SAME TIME, SCHOOLS HAVE BEGUN TO REALIZE THAT PUPILS POSSESS CERTAIN EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS. STUDENTS ARE BEING CONSULTED MORE FREQUENTLY ABOUT SUCH THINGS AS CURRICULUM, TEACHER EMPLOYMENT AND PHILOSOPHY, THE REPORT REVEALS.

GREATER STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE IS ALSO BEING URGENTLY ADVOCATED AND WIDELY ATTEMPTED, ACCORDING TO THE REPORT. MANY EDUCATORS BELIEVE INVOLVED STUDENTS LEARN MORE. INCLUDING STUDENTS IN RUNNING THE SCHOOLS MEETS DEMANDS OF STUDENT GROUPS AND ALSO TEACHES THEM ABOUT DEMOCRACY, THE REPORT SAYS. THE SURVEY FOUND THAT 15 STATES HAVE ADOPTED OR ARE PREPARING STATEMENTS ON STUDENT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES. AT THELOCAL LEVEL, 33% OF THE SCHOOLS HAVE PUBLISHED SUCH FORMAL STATEMENTS. IN ADDITION, OVER 50% OF THE STATES ENCOURAGE STUDENT PARTICIPATION ON SCHOOL BOARDS OR ADVISORY COUNCILS.

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CALIFORNIA, FOR EXAMPLE, REPORTS THAT SOME 80 LOCAL BOARDS HAVE NON-VOTING STUDENT MEMBERS. STUDENTS IN BUFFALO, ATLANTA AND SAN DIEGO HAVE BEEN PAID STIPENDS FOR WORKING AS MEMBERS OF CURRICULUM WRITING AND REVIEW TEAMS. WHILE THE STUDENT RIGHTS MOVEMENT IS NOT LIKELY TO BE SUDDENLY REVERSED, ITS TEMPO MAY BE MODERATING, THE REPORT NOTES. BUT, ONE AUTHORITY CONCLUDED, THE "COURTS HAVE ONLY BEGUN TO APPLY THE BODY OF LAW TO THE SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT ...."

THE CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND EDUCATION IN AMERICAN LIBERTIES AT TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA, HAS DECLARED "OUR SCHOOLS ARE NOW EDUCATING MILLIONS OF STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT FORMING AN ALLIEGANCE TO THE DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEM SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY DO NOT EXPERIENCE SUCH A DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IN THEIR DAILY LIVES IN SCHOOL." OR, LET ME REFER TO A YOUNG MAN AT RUFUS KING HIGH SCHOOL IN MILWAUKEE WHO I THINK SPEAKS FOR MANY STUDENTS IN BOTH RURAL AND URBAN SCHOOLS, IN SUBURBS AND IN GHETTOS WHEN HE SAYS -- "THEY GIVE US A WHOLE LOT OF LANGUAGE ABOUT RESPONSIBILITY, THEY PUNISH US FOR LATENESS AND BAD ATTENDANCE AND HOW WE DRESS, AND WHAT WE SAY, AND WE DON'T HAVE A DAMN THING TO SAY ABOUT ANY OF WHAT THEY CALL "OUR EDUCATION." THEY CLAIM THEY'RE TRYING TO TEACH US RESPONSIBILITY BUT WHAT THEY'RE DOING HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH RESPONSIBILITY -- IT'S FORCE! IF THEY REALLY CARED ABOUT OUR BEING RESPONSIBLE, THEY'D TREAT US LIKE HUMAN BEINGS."

IN THE PAST, THE PRINCIPAL COULD POINT WITH PRIDE TO HIS STUDENT COUNCIL AS AN EXAMPLE OF HOW DEMOCRACY WAS AT WORK IN HIS HIGH SCHOOL. THE STUDENT COUNCIL PROVIDED AN ORDERLY WAY FOR STUDENTS TO DISCUSS THEIR PROBLEMS, PARTIES, AND PROJECTS, BUT SELDOM, IF EVER, DID IT MEAN MORE THAN THE COUNCIL OFFICERS PRESENTING STUDENT PROBLEMS OR PROPOSALS TO THE ADMINISTRATION FOR ITS DECISION. THE STUDENT COUNCIL NEVER VENTURED INTO THE REALM OF CURRICULUM. TODAY HOWEVER, IN A NUMBER OF SCHOOL SYSTEMS, STUDENTS ARE BEING ASKED FOR THEIR OPINIONS IN AREAS THAT USED TO BE RESERVED FOR THE ADMINISTRATION -- THE EVALUATION OF TEACHERS, WHAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE CURRICULUM, WHAT TEXTBOOKS WILL BE USED, WHAT STUDENTS WILL BE ALLOWED TO WEAR, THE DESIGN OF A NEW SCHOOL. AND THE RESULT IS THAT PROTEST IS BEING TURNED INTO POSITIVE ACTION AND DISSENT IS CHANNELED INTO CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM. THE METHODS BY WHICH STUDENTS CAN BE INVOLVED IN A MEANINGFUL 2WAY IN DECISION MAKING IN THEIR SCHOOLS ARE LIMITED THEORETICALLY ONLY BY STATUTE AND STATE DEPARTMENT REGULATIONS.

BUT PRACTICALLY, STUDENT INVOLVEMENT MUST RELY UPON THE RECEPTIVENESS OF THE BOARD, THE ADMINISTRATION AND THE TEACHERS.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ADVISORY BOARD INCLUDING STUDENTS, OR COMPOSED ENTIRELY OF STUDENTS, IS ANOTHER VERY REAL WAY IN WHICH STUDENTS CAN MAKE THEIR PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS KNOWN TO THE ADMINISTRATION. THESE GROUPS OFTEN OPERATE ACCORDING TO BY-LAWS, HAVE SYSTEMATIC METHODS OF SELECTING THEIR MEMBERS AND SOMETIMES ARE EVEN FORMALIZED BY A POLICY OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION.

THESE GROUPS WHICH SERVE IN AN ADVISORY CAPACTIY TO THE CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION AND BOARD OF EDUCATION OFTEN SEND A STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE TO SIT AT BOARD MEETINGS, THUS PROVIDING A REGULAR CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE ADMINISTRATION AND THE STUDENTS. THESE ADVISORY GROUPS MAY CONSIDER ANY SUBJECT WHICH DIRECTLY AFFECTS STUDENTS -- OTHEN THAN BUDGETARY MATTERS-AND SUBMIT RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SUPERINTENDENT AND/OR TO THE BOARD.

SIMILAR GROUPS HAVE BEEN FORMED IN INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS TO BRING SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PRINCIPALS. THERE ARE EVEN HIGH SCHOOL[5] WHERE THE TRADITIONAL STUDENT COUNCIL HAS BEEN REPLACED BY A POLICY MAKING BODY COMPOSED OF FACULTY, ADMINISTRATION AND STUDENTS.

LESS FORMAL CHANNELS HAVE BEEN SET UP IN SOME OTHER SCHOOL SYSTEMS. REGULARLY SCHEDULED LUNCHEON OR DINNER MEETINGS WITH ROTATING GROUPS OF STUDENTS ALLOW THE SUPERINTENDENT , HIS STAFF, AND THE BOARD MEMBERS TO TALK WITH STUDENTS ABOUT THEIR CONCERNS AND WHAT THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE CHANGED.

ON THE DISTRICT LEVEL, SOME CURRICULUM COUNCILS AND SUBJECT-MATTER ADVISORY COMMITTEES INCLUDE STUDENTS AS ADVISORY MEMBERS, OR INVITE STUDENTS TO SERVE AS CONSULTANTS IN PARTICULAR DELIBERATIONS. IN RECENT YEARS, STUDENTS HAVE BEEN PAID TO ASSIST IN SUMMER CURRICULUM PLANNING AND REVISION. DADE COUNTY (MIAMI) FLORIDA HAS HAD SOME SUCCESS IN THIS AREA.

CURRICULUM COMMITTEES IN INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS SOMETIMES INCLUDE STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES. SOME SCHOOLS HAVE CURRICULUM ADVISORY COMMITTEES COMPOSED ENTIRELY OF STUDENTS WHO SUBMIT THEIR RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMITTEES FOR CONSIDERATION.

THE APPOINTMENT OF STUDENTS TO DISTRICT-WIDE OR SCHOOL BUILDING AD/HOC COMMITTEES IS ONE WAY TO TEST THE FEASABILITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES ON PERMANENT COMMITTEES. SOME OF THE AREAS INVESTIGATED BY AD/HOC COMMITTEES WHICH HAVE INCLUDED STUDENTS ARE THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM, BUILDING SPECIFICATION FOR A NEW HIGH SCHOOL, THE SCHOOL SYSTEMS EDUCATIONAL GOALS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLICIES RELATING TO STUDENTS, SUCH AS, DRESS, ATHLETICS, AND DISCIPLINE.

OTHER PROCEDURES FOR INVOLVING STUDENTS IN DECISION-MAKING THAT HAVE BEEN TRIED INCLUDE SURVEYS OF THE STUDENT BODY, STUDENTS ON TEXTBOOK SELECTION COMMITTEES, STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN THE SELECTION OF ADMINISTRATORS AND PARA-PROFESSIONALS, STUDENTS ON SCHOOL ACCREDIDATION SELF-EVALUATION COMMITTEES, STUDENTS ON HUMAN RELATIONS COUNCILS , AND STUDENTS ON DISCIPLINARY REVIEW COUNCILS.

THERE MAY NOT BE ENOUGH EVIDENCE AT PRESENT TO HAND DOWN A VERDICT ON HOW MUCH HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED WHERE STUDENTS HAVE BEEN ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN DELIBERATIONS IN AREAS ONCE RESERVED TO THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF, BUT IT HAS BECOME APPARENT TO MANY ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS THAT THERE IS NO TURNING BACK NOW. TEACHERS WHO HAVE SOLICITED STUDENT EVALUATIONS HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGED AND ENLIGHTENED BY THEIR RESULTS. IN SCHOOLS WHERE MINI-COURSES HAVE BEEN TRIED, STUDENTS, TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND ADMINISTRATORS ARE RECOMMENDING THE INCORPORATION OF THESE NEW IDEA CONCEPTS INTO THE REGULAR CURRICULUM. ALTHOUGH SOME OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS WHO HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN THESE EXPERIMENTS PREFER TO WITHHOLD JUDGMENT UNTIL THE PROCESS HAS TIME TO MATURE, A GREAT MANY OF THEM ARE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THEIR SUCCESS IN OPENING LINES OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF AND THE STUDENT.

WHAT MIGHT BE THE VALUE OF A STUDENT SCHOOL BOARD OR OF MEETINGS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND THE BOARD OF EDUCATION? WELL, I BELIEVE REGULAR MEETINGS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND THE BOARD WOULD BENEFIT BOTH THE STUDENTS INDIVIDUALLY AS WELL AS THE ENTIRE SCHOOL SYSTEM.

THE PARTICIPATING STUDENTS WOULD HAVE DIRECT CONTACT WITH DEDICATED, THOUGHTFUL ADULTS WHO ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR EDUCATION. THIS CONTACT WITH MEN IN A POSITION OF POWER WHO LISTEN TO THEM AND VALUE THEIR CONTRIBUTION WOULD PERMIT THE KIND OF POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION WITH ADULTS WHICH IS SO IMPORTANT. (THERE ARE FEW BETTER WAYS OF LEARNING FOR A STUDENT THAN THE DIRECT AND MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE OF WORKING WITH AN ADULT WHO WANTS TO AND DOES LEARN FROM HIM). AND THERE IS NO BETTER WAY TO GET SOMEONE TO BE OPEN TO OUR IDEAS THAN TO BE OPEN TO HIS. I THINK IT WOULD ALSO BE A VALUABLE EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS TO SEE THAT THE BOARD MEMBERS KNOW THAT THEY DO NOT HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS, THAT THEY TOO ARE WORKING TO LEARN, AND THAT THEY BELIEVE IN EXPLORING MANY SOURCES OF INFORMATION. AND I THINK THAT A MUTUAL EXPLORATION OF VALUES, GOALS, METHODS, AND PERFORMANCES WOULD PROMOTE A FEELING OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR AND UNDERSTANDING OF POLICIES GROWING OUT OF THESE DISCUSSIONS. TO THE EXTENT THAT THESE STUDENTS ARE LEADERS AND MODELS FOR OTHER STUDENTS, THESE BENEFITS WOULD BE TRANSMITTED TO OTHER STUDENTS.

THE MEMBERS OF THE BOARD NEED FREQUENT DIRECT CONTACT WITH STUDENTS IN ORDER TO CARRY OUT THEIR RESPONSIBILITY OF SETTING POLICY WISELY. THE BOARD MUST KNOW WHERE THE SCHOOL SYSTEM IS SUCCEEDING AND WHERE IT IS FAILING. ONE SOURCE OF INFORMATION ABOUT THIS IS DIRECT CONTACT WITH THE PRODUCT OF THIS SYSTEM -- THE STUDENT -- IN A SITUATION WHERE A MEANINGFUL EXCHANGE OF IDEAS CAN OCCUR. THIS IS, OF COURSE, ONLY ONE SOURCE OF INFORMATION THAT THE BOARD CAN USE; BUT FAILING TO USE IT WOULD BE LIKE A BOARD OF A CORPORATION IGNORING THE PRODUCT IT MANUFACTURES OR THE BOARD OF A PUBLISHING HOUSE NOT READING ANY OF ITS PUBLICATIONS. BUT HOW MUCH TIME CAN A BOARD DEVOTE TO MEETING WITH A STUDENT SCHOOL BOARD. THE BOARD HAS MANY AND HIGH DEMANDS OF ITS TIME. YET, IN TERMS OF PRIORITY, I BELIEVE THAT THE STUDENTS ARE A MOST IMPORTANT GROUP FOR THE BOARD TO MEET WITH REGULARLY. REGULARITY OF MEETING IS PROBABLY AS IMPORTANT AS FREQUENCY. REGULARITY WILL PERMIT DEVELOPMENT OF TRUST ON BOTH SIDES AND WILL ENCOURAGE LONG-TERM RATHER THAN CRISIS APPROACHES TO PROBLEMS.

YOU CAN ASSUME THAT THE STUDENTS WILL BE AS AFRAID OF THE BOARD AS THE BOARD IS OF THEM; THEY WILL TRUST THE BOARD AS LITTLE OR AS MUCH AS THE BOARD TRUSTS THEM.

IT IS FRIGHTENING TO EXTEND ONE'S AREA OF TRUST -- AND IT IS RISKY. BUT THE COST OF NOT TAKING THIS RISK IS NO NEW HONESTY -- AND NO NEW UNDERSTANDING. ANOTHER RISK I CAN ATTEST TO AS A TEACHER IS THAT MANY YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE A FASTER RATE OF LEARNING THAN ADULTS, AND NOT INFREQUENTLY STUDENTS COME ALONG WHO ARE MORE INTELLIGENT THAN WE. THIS COMBINATION OF TALENTS CAN BE DISCONCERTING, BUT IT ALSO CAN BE, ONE OF THE CHIEF SOURCES OF PLEASURE AND STIMULATION IN TEACHING AND FOR THE YOUNGSTERS, OUR LONGER AND BROADER EXPERIENCE CAN BE EQUALLY VALUABLE. I THINK THERE WOULD BE THE SAME RISKS AND PLEASURE AND STIMULATION FOR A BOARD MEMBER MEETING SERIOUSLY WITH STUDENTS.

I AM NOT SUGGESTING THIS PRIMARILY AS A WAY OF AVOIDING CRISES, ALTHOUGH THAT IT WILL HELP TO DO. IT WILL NOT BE EASY OR PAINLESS FOR EITHER GROUP. ON A SHORT TERM BASIS IT WOULD BE EASIER NOT TO ATTEMPT IT. I AM SUGGESTING IT AS ONE WAY OF DEVELOPING POLICIES WITHIN WHICH STUDENTS AND THE ADULT EDUCATOR CAN WORK TOGETHER, SHARING THE RESPONSIBILITY, THE RISKS, AND THE JOY OF PREPARING FOR AN UNKNOWN FUTURE.

IN CONCLUSION, IT SEEMS TO ME THAT, FIRST OF ALL, EDUCATION IS A SERIES OF QUESTIONS MORE THAN A SERIES OF ANSWERS, A CONTINUING SEARCH MORE THAN A CONCLUDING DISCOVERY, AN EVALUATION OF PROBABILITIES MORE THAN AN ESTABLISHING OF CERTAINTIES.

AGAIN, JUST AS KNOWLEDGE IS CHANGING, THE FUTURE WILL BE DIFFERENT FROM THE PAST, FOR IT WILL BE PROFOUNDLY INFLUENCED BY KNOWLEDGE THAT NEITHER WAS AVAILABLE IN THE PAST NOR IS AVAILABLE AT THE PRESENT. IF ANYTHING IS CERTAIN ABOUT THE FUTURE, IT IS THAT THERE WILL BE CHANGE. FURTHERMORE, THE PREPARATION OF OUR CHILDREN FOR AN UNKNOWN FUTURE IN WHICH THE ONLY CERTAINTY IS CHANGE FOCUSES THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION LESS ON THE TRANSMISSION OF TRADITION AND PRESENT KNOWLEDGE THAN ON THE FOSTERING OF OPENNESS AND FLEXIBILITY. AND FINALLY, IN CERTAIN WAYS OUR CHILDREN ARE CLOSER TO THE FUTURE THAN WE ARE, BECAUSE THEY KNOW MORE INTIMATELY THOSE (THEMSELVES AND THEIR PEERS) WHO WILL INHERIT AND CREATE THE FUTURE LONG AFTER WE HAVE GONE.